

Project Description

Against Elites, Against Outsiders: Sources of **D**emocracy Critique, Immigration Critique, and **R**ight-Wing Populism (**DIR**)

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1. Background and main goals of the project

Germany is facing several societal challenges: the large influx of refugees, the increasing number of hate crimes, the openly articulated distrust in politics and the media as well as the increasing support for right-wing populist parties and movements like the AfD and PEGIDA. Regarding the latter, similar right-wing populist tendencies gain strength in more or less all established democracies. This results in major implications for party systems, the so-called mainstream parties, the working of representative democracy, and public discourse. Consequently, right-wing populism has become a main topic of German and international research. This work includes but is not limited to interpreting right-wing populism as trigger of, symptom of, and reaction to a potential crisis of representative democracy.

Besides conceptual studies and approaches to classify political parties as being right-wing populist, in the social sciences, we observe a dominance of analyses on why these parties and views have become so successful. Basically, two driving forces are deemed to be highly influential and, in a way, they represent the rebirth of Schmitt's concept of the friend and the enemy as the core paradigm of politics. On the one hand, scholarly work puts forward people's critique of and delimitation from 'those at the top' – the elites (*vertical distinction*). This includes distrust in structures, actors, and processes of representative democracy and challenging their legitimacy. On the other hand, the emphasis of a collective 'we' in contrast to outsiders has been carved out as an important driving force (*horizontal distinction*). According to socio-psychological research, group boundaries based on ethnic and religious characteristics play a particularly important role in this regard due to their identity-generating function. In addition, in consequence of increasing cultural diversity of Western societies, ethnic and religious group boundaries become more and more salient.

At the heart of the project 'Against Elites, Against Outsiders: Sources of **D**emocracy Critique, Immigration Critique, and **R**ight-Wing Populism' (**DIR**) rests the research question on whether there are common sources of critical attitudes towards democracy and its elites and towards individuals which are seen as alien due to their ethnic or cultural origins. Primarily, attitudes constitute evaluations of individuals, social groups, objects, or ideas. Social-psychological research provides us with a good understanding of attitude formation and attitudinal change. The focus especially lies on the role of socialization and learning, on certain personality traits and ideologies (e.g., social dominance orientation or authoritarianism), and on basic human needs and motives (like belonging vs. distinctiveness, control vs. autonomy, or reservation vs. growth) as the central determinants of attitudes. In contrast, political science and sociology show a significant desideratum in this regard. While

there was an increase in studies on dissatisfaction with democracy and political apathy already in the 1990s, scholars mainly focused on their consequences and less on their sources. This strong focus on consequences in political science and sociology in comparison to psychological research helps to broaden the perspective by providing a comprehensive causal model.

Critique of societal conditions and the political system are typical phenomena in times of transition and challenges. However, there is considerable variation in the strength, content, form, and goals of critical stances on democracy and immigration. To explore under which circumstances such skepticism and critique convert into fundamentally deprecatory, right-wing populist support that poses a certain threat to liberal democracies, the DIR project will look at characteristics and mechanisms that characterize attitude formation and change.

Primarily, the DIR project focuses on four sets of questions:

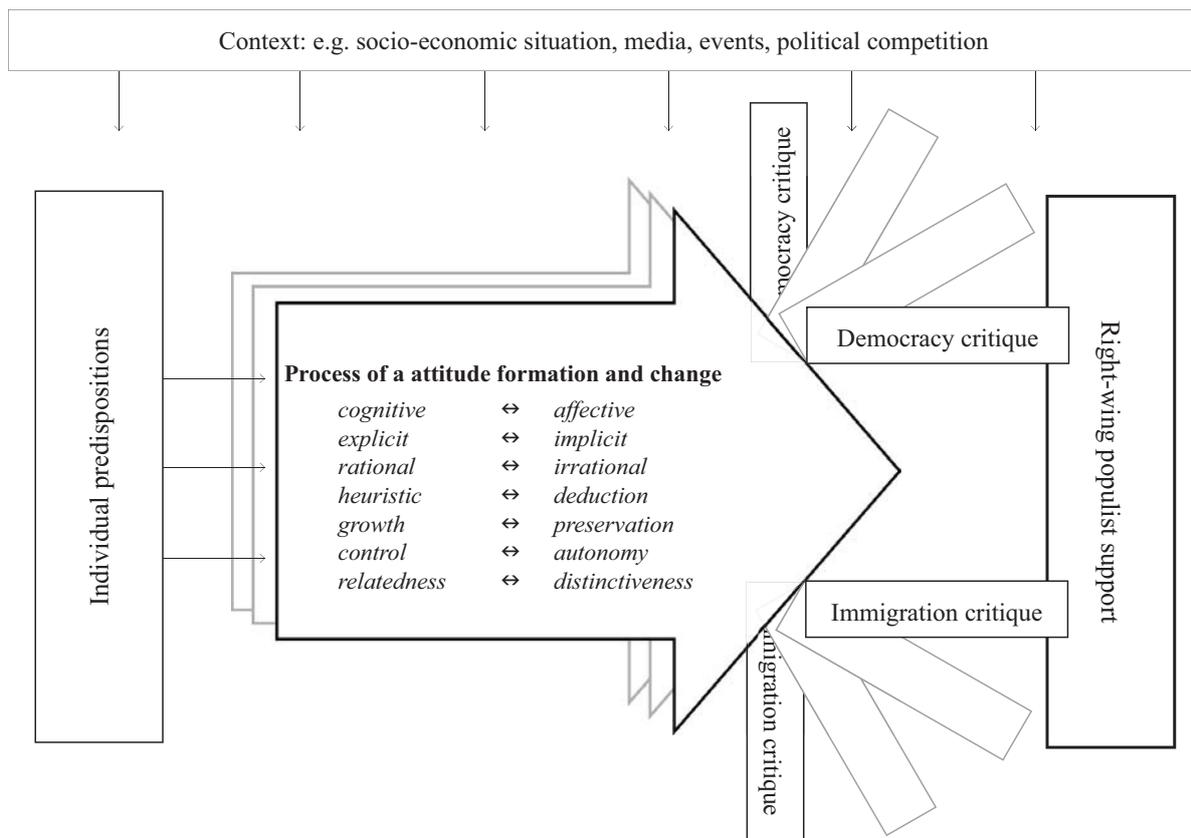
1. Which mechanisms characterize a process model of attitude formation and change in the context of democracy critique and immigration critique? Are there specific characteristics, for example with regard to the foundation of attitudes, information acquisition and processing or human motives and needs, which structure these processes?
2. How do individual predispositions interact with contextual factors at the meso- and macro level in the process of attitude formation and change?
3. Are there specific patterns that help to understand when and why skepticism and critique convert into right-wing populist support?
4. Do these patterns as well as the general process of attitude formation and change differ depending on the attitudinal object, that is, with regard to attitudes towards democracy and immigration (vertical and horizontal distinction)?

Elaborating on these questions will increase our understanding of the success of right-wing populism which goes far beyond a mere connection of attitudes to the support of a specific political party or movement. Moreover, the generated knowledge concerning relevant mechanisms in interaction with individual predispositions and contextual factors will make it possible to derive concrete policy recommendations. The main empirical application will be on right-wing populism in Germany. However, the theoretical framework that will be developed within the project (see next paragraph) will make a general contribution to research on attitudes, their sources, the moderating impact of contextual factors, and underlying needs and motives.

2. Theoretical framework and scope

The DIR project aims to increase our understanding of the complex dynamics that result in critical stances on democracy and immigration by carving out the shared sources of vertical and horizontal distinction processes as drivers of right-wing populist tendencies. The schematic framework presented in Figure 1 summarizes first thoughts on these dynamics in a simplified way as a starting point for the conceptual project work.

Figure 1: Framework



As Figure 1 illustrates, we assume processes of attitude formation and change to mediate the relationship between individual predispositions (e.g. age, gender, status, personality or ideologies) and levels of democracy and immigration critique. Moreover, we predict contextual factors at the meso and macro level (i.e. structural characteristics as well as events) to moderate the relationships between individual predispositions, processes of attitude formation and change, and attitudes towards democracy and immigration. As indicated on the right hand side of our model, neither democracy critique nor immigration critique are assumed to necessarily result in support of right-wing populism. Conversely, right-wing attitudes always coincide with mistrust in democracy, elites, and media (vertical distinction from ‘elites’) and with opposition to immigration and cultural diversity (horizontal distinction from ‘outsiders’). We assume that whether or not critique converts into right-wing populist support depends on the specific nature of the involved processes of attitude formation and change; graphically illustrated by the tilting boxes in Figure 1.

As outlined above, our first research question focuses on the process of attitude formation (see the large arrow in the centre of Figure 1). Attitudes always have an affective, a cognitive, and a behavioural component, with strong variation in their relative importance. Psychological literature, therefore, often refers to cognitively-based and affectively-based attitudes. Cognitively-based attitudes are linked to beliefs about features and characteristics of attitude objects, tend to involve cost-benefit calculations, and can easily be rationalized. Affectively-based attitudes, by contrast, are strongly influenced by emotions and values. They tend to rely on heuristic information processing, are strongly subjective by nature, and difficult to rationalize. Against this background, we aim at exploring the mechanisms that characterize the process of forming critical attitudes towards democracy and immigration. Are such attitudes based on well-defined arguments linked to objective

information or rather on values and emotions (cognitively-based vs. affectively-based; rational vs. irrational)? Which approach to information acquisition characterizes attitude formation and change, and how is potentially relevant information processed (heuristic vs. deductive)? How accessible are such attitudes (explicit vs. implicit)? Which roles play basic human needs (control vs. autonomy; relatedness vs. distinctiveness) and motives (growth vs. preservation) in this regard? Obviously, these questions cannot only be related to the process of attitude formation. We will also investigate whether the same patterns can be found regarding attitude change.

Our second research question addresses the interaction between individual predispositions (see the left-hand side of Figure 1) and contextual factors at the meso and macro level (at the top in Figure 1) as well as their joint impact on processes of attitude formation and change. For research on the impact of context level factors, a dynamic approach on mobilization seems suitable: New(s) media and right-wing populist entrepreneurs are assumed to significantly affect crucial aspects, for example, by triggering emotional responses and by activating and satisfying basic human needs. Potentially relevant questions are: Which kind of events increase the likelihood of information processing primarily based on heuristics? How do election campaigns, politicization, and the diversification of media alter the impact of different mechanisms characterizing attitude formation and change? Do similar patterns emerge for different sociodemographic groups or for individuals with different personality traits? Do the patterns differ depending on the attitudinal object?

Our third research question zooms in on the tilting boxes at the right-hand side of our model. From a general perspective, democracy critique is much more than just a facet of right-wing populist attitudes. Democracy critique has always been (characterized as) a driver of endogenous reforms of the system by the people. Likewise, skepticism against the alien, that is, against novel and unfamiliar events or strangers, is deeply rooted in human nature. Hence, by definition, critique of democracy in its current shape and critique of immigration do neither always pose a threat to liberal societies, nor do they always lead to the support of right-wing populism. However, there seems to be a certain imbalance between the two types of critique in research as well as public discourse - probably as a result of normative considerations. To give an example: Much attention is drawn towards the *motivation* for criticizing democracy and/or immigration. On the one hand, the term '*critical citizens*' is positively connoted and the critique of critical citizens is assumed to be rational and well-informed. On the other hand, citizens who are, for example, joining PEGIDA protests are often assumed to be primarily motivated by emotions, which in turn is associated with a devaluation of the critique and its legitimacy. Even though both groups of people criticize the current democratic regime and its policies, the ascribed legitimacy of such critique strongly differs. At the same time, these two groups might also differ empirically from one another with regard to the likelihood of developing right-wing populist support. If this is the case, we are able to judge the danger to liberal democracy and society on empirical grounds and not only based on a normative judgement.

Finally, we want to explore whether similar patterns characterize the formation and change of attitudes towards democracy and immigration. As both types of attitudes increase the probability of supporting right-wing populism, it becomes interesting to investigate whether their connection solely exists in terms of the outcome (support of right-wing populism) or whether we also find similarities in how they develop or change. In other words, the project asks whether there are common sources in terms of individual predispositions and mechanisms as well as universal effects of contextual factors on these relationships.

Coming back to the overall process model as presented in Figure 1, we can highlight the relevance and potential impact of DIR beyond the sphere of science. Linking predispositions, contextual factors, and attitudes – regarding democracy as well as immigration – and pointing out when and how this process generates right-wing populist support due to specific (patterns of) mechanisms allows us to suggest efficient counter-strategies, for example, for policy-makers or NGOs. If one accepts the assumption that different mechanisms play a different role for different people, it seems banal to note that the effect of counter-strategies primarily depends on how well they address these patterns. In other words, the project not only increases our general understanding by developing and implementing a process model but it is also able to deliver guidelines on judging the effectiveness of counter-strategies which is obviously necessary in a world of limited resources.

3. Research strategy and empirical approach

Political science research on democracy critique and (socio-)psychological research on immigration critique does not only differ in terms of substantive focus, scope, theoretical background, and terminology but especially in terms of methodology and the epistemological qualities of findings. Psychology mainly relies on laboratory experiments including controlled treatments to identify causal relationships. In contrast, political science and sociology focus on the identification of representative quasi-causal patterns while controlling for large sets of covariates using mass surveys. Both methodological approaches have promises and pitfalls and, similar to the development of the theoretical framework, DIR again aims to build bridges between scientific disciplines by making use of the best of both worlds.

In terms of case selection, the main focus will be on Germany. Germany constitutes a very interesting object to apply our framework to because, for example, there still are traces of ‘two Germanies’ as a heritage of the country’s division until 1990. Moreover, the relatively young AfD represents the first right-wing party showing nationwide electoral success in Germany since WW II and this success seems to increase the more the party combines democracy critique with immigration critique. Additionally, Germany was confronted with a very large number of refugees in the last couple of years while debates about the societal role of Islam have become more salient and frequent. However, DIR is open to apply the framework to other countries as well.

Based on this strategy, we aim to maximize internal and external validity of our findings. This also implies a certain chronology of implementation, which can be described as follows:

Phase 1: In the first phase of the project, the team will work on the theoretical framework by compiling a thorough literature review in all relevant fields. This step as well as secondary data analyses provide guidelines to refine the underlying framework and to generate a better understanding of mechanisms at work with the goal of developing testable hypotheses.

Phase 2: In this period, we test these hypotheses in laboratory experiments. By doing so, we establish causal links and causal effects of mechanisms. Going back to Figure 1, this includes experiments on the role of predispositions and contextual effects, which supposedly shape the role of mechanisms.

Phase 3: The third phase aims at investigating the generalizability of our findings in phase 2 by translating the core results in a way that makes them usable in mass surveys.

Moreover, we establish representative figures on the distribution of critical attitudes towards democracy and integration and support for right-wing populism on the one hand and predispositions and characteristics linked to the mechanisms on the other hand. In addition, the resulting analyses have a close look at the consequences (in terms of political and social behavior).

Phase 4: Finally, the project team will work on a comprehensive presentation of DIR and its results. As argued above, the full potential of the project stems from its integrating and bridging character which will be represented in several publications – including journal articles, PhD work by junior researchers, and a book by the team.

4. Selection of potentially relevant literature

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